



Mindful Approaches to Behavior & Mental Health Difficulties

In Plum Village Sangha Practice

**from the Mental Health and Well-Being Practices Committee
of the North American Dharma Teachers Sangha – Care Taking Council (CTC)
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Introduction

Our Plum Village tradition offers us the gifts of practice for cultivating our joy, peace and harmony and transforming our suffering. They offers us many practices for transformation and healing, and deeply encourages us to practice within a Sangha. Indeed, They has often said that Maitrea, the next incarnation of the Buddha, will be the Sangha. Sangha harmony and the process of maintaining that harmony are essential to awaken ourselves and others, and relieve suffering. Our Plum Village tradition is offering Buddhism a pioneering path in Sangha practice, which means Sanghas are learning from experience — not only their own but each other's, a true practice of Interbeing.

Challenges of Sangha practice. Sangha practice is not always easy. The Dharma Teachers Sangha bi-annual retreat in March 2014 included an engaging discussion about mental health issues that occur in Sanghas, and how disruptive this can be to Sangha harmony. There has been a call for guidance to help Sangha facilitators with such challenges. Thus, the CTC approved the formation of the “Mental Health and Well-Being Practices Committee,” which began its work in the fall of 2014 and produced this booklet in the spring of 2016.

The main intention of this booklet is to share insights in responding to situations when behavior disrupts Sangha harmony, sometimes in ways go beyond the Sangha's ability to facilitate the transformation of suffering. We rest in awareness that we are all learning together as a community and that no one of us has all the answers. When we are able to look deeply together through the many facets of our collective diamond, we have a much clearer view.

This booklet is not meant to be prescriptive. Each situation is different. Fresh thinking and local, specific solutions are needed. This booklet is intended to help describe a range of possible responses to some situations that may be encountered. It was researched and written by the following Dharma teacher members of the Mental Health and Well-being Practices Committee: Andre Vellino, Chau Yoder, David Flint, Jeanne Anselmo, Jo-ann Rosen, and John Bell, and final editing by Leslie Rawls. Much of the experience described in the booklet is drawn from a 2015 survey of Dharma teachers, many of whom responded with generosity and thoughtfulness.

Purpose of Sangha

We begin with revisiting the purpose of a Sangha, because being clear about the purpose is one element that helps Sangha harmony. “A Sangha is a community of friends practicing the Dharma together in order to bring about and maintain awareness. The essence of a Sangha is awareness, understanding, acceptance, harmony, and love.” [*Friends on the Path*, page 18.] Our Sanghas are inspired by the teachings and practice of Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay) and are part of a network of national and international Sanghas [communities]: a “fourfold community” of laywomen and laymen, nuns and monks, walking together on a spiritual path. In *Joyfully Together*, Thay tells us, “The Sangha is our community of practice and it is also our refuge. We rely on it and trust it to support our deepest aspirations and give us energy and inspiration on the path of practice.” The Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing guide our Sangha Practice, as part of the Plum Village Tradition.

What Sanghas do and how they do it varies; each Sangha has its own flavor, and is also recognizable as ‘home’ by others in the Plum Village Tradition. Often Sanghas meet regularly, with meditative practices, conscious breathing, and Dharma sharing as their core. They agree on ways of making decisions. For instance, some Sanghas have evolved toward more shared and consensus based decision making. It is beneficial for local Sanghas to develop connections to other Sanghas and practitioners, to Dharma teachers, and to our monastic Sangha.

In the ongoing development of Sangha practice, Thich Nhat Hanh has offered a variety of Sangha Forms to address different needs in supporting transformation and healing including:

- 1) Mindfulness Practice Centers offering this practice in a ‘secular’ form.
- 2) Special interest communities of practice: Wakeup for young adults; ARISE and People of Color Sanghas.
- 3) Retreats led by professionals such as teachers in schools or helping professionals in healthcare settings.
- 4) Monastic practice

Our practice emphasizes Sangha practice as a vehicle for personal and collective transformation, embracing both the “pleasant” and “unpleasant” parts of Sangha life. We recognize that the capacity of a specific Sangha to do this is depends on specific ‘causes and conditions.’ Some Sanghas began with solid and experienced practitioners, who were also skilled in group process and knowledge of mental health challenges. Others began with much inspiration, and much less in the way depth of practice and experience in ‘groups.’ It sometimes seems a matter of ‘luck’ as to whether a Sangha encounters greater or lesser challenges at the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ times.

Thay has always emphasized the need to nurture the harmony of the Sangha so it becomes a solid container that supports the transformation of suffering. Yet we must acknowledge that we also have to live with people who are suffering and whose suffering can be difficult to understand and embrace. Some situations and people that challenge Sangha harmony may be too much to “hold.” As we all know from our own lives, sometimes we are not able to use “help,” even when we need it. This occasionally occurs with people who come to Sangha with serious “problems.” As Thay says in *Joyfully Together*: “Inclusiveness is a basic quality for someone who wants to build a Sangha, but sometimes we must also ask: how far should our inclusiveness go? The situation of the Sangha during the lifetime of the Buddha was the same. There were members of the Sangha who were very difficult, and even the Buddha had to agree sometimes to ask them to leave the Sangha.”

Our intention here is to offer support and Sangha wisdom to address the individual and collective suffering that can arise in our Sangha practice.

Examples of behaviors that have challenged Sangha harmony.

Most people come to Sangha to find relief from suffering. Some suffering is individual, coming from their own lives. Some suffering is collective, coming from a wider society and a world suffering deeply from enduring racism, violence and war, hunger and poverty, and climate change, to name a few sources of collective suffering.

Given these conditions, it is understandable and laudable that people in troubled times like the present seek refuge in Sanghas, spiritual communities, twelve-step programs, and support groups of all kinds. Some folks carry with them deep distress from personal and/or societal mistreatment. Most people’s troubles stay private; some also show up in our Sanghas, which can cause discomfort, disruption, and sometimes even the destruction of Sangha safety and harmony.

Below are examples of disruptions reported in the 2015 survey of U.S. and Canadian Dharma teachers. We intentionally note a spectrum of behaviors ranging from ordinary unawareness to diagnosed mental illness. We have grouped them in several categories and given some detail in certain situations. This section just lists the situations. Some approaches for handling such situations are described in the next section. (Care has been taken to create anonymity.)

Unaware habit energy

- One person repeatedly took long turns during Dharma sharing, leaving no time for others, with no awareness of how it limited others.

- One person asserted their views in a loud voice with judging words during Sangha and in side conversations.
- A Vietnam veteran's non-stop talking and angry outbursts were at first tolerated but then became troubling to the Sangha.
- One Sangha member repeatedly cried for the majority of their Dharma sharing time. This caused discomfort and upset among some members. Facilitator received calls or emails complaining that "Sangha is not a therapy group".
- A Sangha member chronically arrived late, then would get up to talk on their cell phone outside the meditation room; tended to talk "off topic" in Dharma discussion, often sharing intimate and explicitly sexual experiences.

Personal, societal, environmental causes and conditions intruding on Sangha

Hard times can cause much suffering, which spill over into the Sangha. Examples:

- A regular Sangha member became homeless. At each subsequent Sangha meeting, they would ask Sangha members for support or a place to sleep. This became increasingly uncomfortable for other Sangha members.
- After a natural disaster wiped out her home, a Sangha member became suicidal. She talked about suicide in Sangha, and several times showed up on the Sangha facilitator's porch at 3 am.
- A Sangha member who struggled with addictions would occasionally overdose. Their Sangha sharing after overdoses often involved thoughts of suicide, which caused major concern among Sangha members.
- Three Sangha member suicides in different Sanghas were mentioned in the Dharma teacher's survey, as well as several threatened suicides among Sangha members. The suicides caused much suffering in the Sanghas; time was needed for processing and healing. The suicide threats also caused concern and confusion about how to respond.

Opposition to Sangha facilitator or guidelines

- A Sangha member insisted that things be done his way, including not honoring the practice forms of inviting the bell or bowing before and after speaking.
- A Sangha member was unable or unwilling to follow Dharma sharing guidelines, despite coaching.
- One Sangha experienced a steady and corrosive push and pull between the Sangha facilitator and several Sangha members over format, decision-making, and the readings. The discord caused much confusion and disharmony in the Sangha. After trying various solutions, the facilitator and other Sangha members eventually left the Sangha.

- A Sangha member who declared himself an OI aspirant was not considered “ripe” for aspirancy by several OI Sangha members, but enlisted other Sangha members’ support, causing disagreement in the Sangha that persisted for some time.
- One person would email the Sangha facilitator to express gratitude for being treated with kindness by the facilitator, while criticizing other Sangha members, only later to turn the same criticism on the Sangha facilitator.
- A Sangha member’s views about the “business” of the Sangha upset other Sangha members to the degree that some members left the Sangha.

Sexual harassment and threatening behavior

- One Sangha member wrote unsolicited and unwanted emails to another Sangha member, asking for a relationship.
- A Sangha member followed another member home for weeks.
- One Sangha member made sexual comments and gestures to other Sangha members, and became angry when told it made Sangha members uncomfortable.
- An experienced practitioner was accused of sexual harassment by a Sangha leader and was not open to counseling. Other Sangha leaders had differing opinions of this issue. This split caused disharmony and lack of safety in the Sangha.

Unexpected or unusual behaviors

- Someone began coming to Sangha who appeared spiritually sincere, but was inappropriate in Sangha sharing using loud singing and taking a lot of time and space. Coaching did not help. One day the person appeared at Sangha dressed in bizarre and frightening costume. When asked to remove the costume, the person objected and reacted with anger.
- Someone came to a Sangha meeting, hid under the piano, and during walking meditation jumped out and yelled, “Boo!”
- Someone came to Sangha, acted paranoid, inspected the whole house, checked every room, was restless, then left. This upset Sangha members.
- Someone tried to give out business cards and interacted with Sangha members during walking meditation.
- Someone who was upset with the Sangha facilitator-Dharma teacher showed up at their house and physically threatened them.

The frame & language of mindfulness in describing mental health difficulties

Some of the examples above involved Sangha members with a mental illness. But for Sangha harmony, we do not need to distinguish between ordinary, rigid habit energy and clinically diagnosed mental illness. Each of us experiences a spectrum of continually changing mental states, sometime happy, peaceful, joyful states, and sometimes unwholesome, painful, or

distressed states. Our society's mental health profession has labels and diagnoses for various distressed states of mind that can be helpful but can also be harmful.

In our Plum Village practice, we choose not use these labels for several reasons. First, a person is a person, and not a diagnosis or label. We try to see the Buddha nature of every human being, despite any particular historical manifestation. Second, very few Sangha facilitators are trained mental health professionals; so most of us would be unprepared to make sound use of any label or diagnosis. As a variation on an old saying goes, "a little knowledge in the hands of the unskilled can be a dangerous thing." Third, Sangha practitioners with officially diagnosed mental illness may thrive in Sangha and the mental conditions do not harm the Sangha. Finally, if any of us reviewed various mental illness descriptions in psychiatric diagnostic manuals, we would find many descriptors applied to us in certain circumstances at certain times. Realizing this should give us insight into the changing nature of mind, and give us pause about separating ourselves from those who carry such labels.

Yet some mind states and behaviors — discomfort, confusion, disruption, worry, distraction, fear, etc. — may cause trouble in a Sangha and call for a skillful response. Our practice calls upon Sangha members and Sangha facilitators to both respect and protect the individual whose suffering seems to be cause of the problem, and to protect the Sangha from harm.

The next section describes various approaches Sanghas have used in handling behavior that upsets Sangha harmony. These are suggestions only, not fixed recommendations or cures, since each situation is different and requires fresh thinking.

Various approaches to engaging with troublesome behavior in Sangha

The following approaches were harvested from the survey of Dharma teachers, all of whom were part of well-established Sanghas. From this we might guess that the incidence of difficulties in newer Sanghas, especially without benefit of long term practitioners, might be somewhat different.

Survey results indicated that Sanghas that resolved issues with the greatest degree of self-reported success were attempting to walk the middle way between being welcoming and discerning when the Sangha setting may not meet the needs of particular practitioners, or when the Sangha itself does not have the stability to accommodate those needs; setting clear guidelines and boundaries, while not making the Sangha body inflexible and unaccommodating to diverse practitioners; and threading the needle between individual autonomy and collective support.

General Approaches.

First, we offer some general approaches followed by specific practices, all culled from the Dharma Teachers survey.

- Clear Sangha membership protocols, boundaries, structure, and purpose can help promote Sangha harmony. More on this below.
- Inclusivity and welcoming all are fundamental to our Sanghas. That said, a basic condition for Sangha participation is that a given individual is able to be in a Sangha in a way that does not overwhelm the functioning of the Sangha. Sometimes a person will be unaware of his or her impact on the group.
- While all Sangha members are asked to practice with accepting people whom we perceive as “pleasant” and “unpleasant,” discernment is also an essential practice for maintaining Sangha harmony. For example:
 - o Some members whose behavior causes disharmony are open to a Sangha facilitator’s feedback and some are not able to take advantage of feedback. Some are able and willing to accept Sangha expectations and boundaries, and some are not. Some are able or willing to accept practice guidelines, and some are not.
 - o Can a Sangha member take in feedback and attempt to change or do they become defensive or unwilling to modify their behavior? A person’s capacity to hear and change can be noticed fairly quickly.
 - o Depending on the Sangha, sometimes a Sangha member’s suffering and resulting behaviors can be held by Sangha, sometimes not.
- In general, a Sangha member’s behavior cannot be allowed to overshadow the fundamental purpose and harmony of the Sangha.
- When a Sangha member clearly cannot participate in a harmonious way in Sangha, the Sangha facilitator or other Sangha members can be bridges to other kinds of help or support. (See Resource section below.)
- In attempting to resolve Sangha harmony issues, some respondents in the Dharma teacher survey said that they wished they had acted sooner, or acted collectively, or not acted unilaterally, or consulted with a local mental health professional.

No set of rules will substitute for wise discerning in each moment; although being aware of options can help. Sangha conflict and tensions are invitations to practice. Sometimes the opportunity is to practice right speech and deep listening, or checking our assumptions and perspectives, or developing more generosity and patience, or examining the roots of aversion to this situation, and so on. Sometimes the opportunity is to practice firmness, holding the line, protecting the Sangha, exercising skillful leadership.

Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Since conflict and disagreement may well be part of Sangha experience, it is important to learn how to practice with conflict. Sometimes it is important to see that a situation invites Sangha members to stretch their comfort zones and look deeply into the difficulty at hand. That might entail looking into our needs for “helping” people in distress, or maybe our inability to be with another's suffering, or our lack of confidence in ourselves or others to handle a challenging situation well. Maybe the behavior in question triggers old memories from our childhood, distorting how we react in the present situation. No matter what, we know difficulties are opportunities for deepening our practice and we should not think there is something wrong just because we struggle.

New people may drop into the Sangha, check things out, and come and go as if the Sangha were a marketplace. As we know, most come because they are looking for help for their suffering. Sanghas, being relatively safe and welcoming, may encourage some people, and their psychotherapists, to see our groups as safe havens. This is not necessarily a problem. Indeed, in the survey, several Sanghas reported that they have had members with chronic mental health diagnoses who, when given clear guidelines and feedback, have become long term, valued Sangha members.

Promoting Sangha well-being: Prevention methods.

Some Sanghas have used structures, policies, and protocols to create a sound, cohesive practice container that may reduce the occurrence of behavior that disrupts Sangha harmony. Some examples:

1. Clear process for becoming Sangha “member.” Some Sanghas have found it useful to create pathways for becoming a member. For example, a newcomer attends three Sangha meetings, and if interested in continuing, has an interview with the Sangha facilitator, who explains Sangha guidelines, expectations, and format, answers questions, and asks for agreement with Sangha guidelines and format.
2. Maintain strong Sangha forms. Many solid Sanghas follow a consistent and predictable Sangha format. They use the Plum Village practices consistently and skillfully. They introduce and periodically recite the Five Mindfulness Trainings which tend to provide Sangha members with a safe, grounded practice container, and remind members of Right Speech.
3. Criteria for the Sangha care taking council. Harmonious Sanghas tend to have a Sangha “care taking council” (CTC) for decision-making and Sangha development. In several Sanghas, only practitioners who have received the Five Mindfulness Trainings can serve on

the CTC. This way, the Sangha's guiding body has already accepted the community's basic ethical guidelines.

4. Establish boundaries. Harking back to the earlier section on the purpose of Sangha, sound Sanghas tend to be clear that the Sangha is in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Sangha is not a place to recruit people for political purposes, investment opportunities, or romantic relationships. Though offers of help may arise spontaneously, the Sangha is not intended as a social service or psychotherapy group. A Sangha's basic purpose is to practice mindfulness in a safe setting with others who aspire to heal from suffering and awaken to our true natures, and to cultivate more joy and reduce suffering for self and others. Here are a couple of specific written policies mentioned as examples of boundary-setting:
 - “If we would like to pursue a friendship or relationship with someone from Sangha, we will first ask permission of the other person, and if we do not receive a positive response — whether it is a negative response or no response at all — we will refrain from pursuing further that friendship or relationship.”
 - “If you would like to contact someone about issues of a confidential nature, please first get in touch with a member of the care taking council in person or through email. We will address the matter confidentially, or incorporate concerns in future planning meetings on everyone's behalf.”

Promoting Sangha Well-being: Engaged, Applied Intervention methods_

If an individual's behavior or mental health difficulties become disruptive in Sangha, Sanghas have tried a variety of ways of responding.

1. First talk with the person. With kindness and respect, privately ask if they are aware of the behavior in question or knows that it is not in keeping with the Sangha guidelines or the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Can they see how the behavior adversely affects others in the Sangha or the overall Sangha harmony? Listen deeply to them. Sometimes, being listened to is enough to soften the habit energy driving the behavior. It has been helpful to give the person a letter specifically identifying the problematic behaviors and explaining what needs to be done or not done. When even repeated deep listening is not sufficient, suggest a referral or other means of support.
2. Remember their Buddha nature. The Sangha facilitator attempting to be helpful with someone whose behavior is troublesome might ask him or herself, “Who is the Buddha inside this person? Whatever the behavior is, what needs are they trying to nurture behind

the disruptive behavior?” Perhaps the facilitator can then brainstorm with the person how those needs could be met by means other than the problematic behavior.

3. View it as a practice area for Sangha members. The behaviors we are focusing on are often quite unsettling for all Sangha members. As mentioned earlier, it may help to ask Sangha members to look into their own fears, discomfort, safety, and re-stimulations of past hurts that the current situation may remind them of. This can be a very helpful process for healing, and helps develop compassion, and avoid blaming the “other,” feeling victimized, or further isolating ourselves from the human being trapped in his or her suffering. View the difficulties as opportunities to look deeply and stretch our practice.
4. Make skillful use of well-developed Plum Village practices. Because Plum Village monastics live together, of necessity, they have become pioneers in developing personal growth and conflict resolution tools: Flower Watering, Peace Treaty, and Beginning Anew (see <http://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/beginning-anew/>). These can be carefully adapted for lay Sangha use, and with skill and preparation might be appropriately used to help restore Sangha harmony. In recent years, the North American Dharma Teachers have developed a conflict resolution protocol that might be adapted for Sangha use. (Contact a local Dharma Teacher to see if this document might be appropriate.)
5. Provide a range of meditation practices. Sangha facilitators have used a variety of practices to help practitioners handle their mind states. For example, when a Sangha member is particularly agitated and shows body restlessness, walking meditation, especially outdoors when weather and surroundings permit, has helped calm agitation. Practitioners who are prone to depression can benefit from chanting practice or total relaxation. (See next section for more practices.)
6. Ask someone to leave Sangha. Sometimes, it is necessary to ask the person not to come back to Sangha, for his/her sake and the Sangha’s sake. The Sangha member requesting the person not to return should be able to communicate clearly, directly and suggest a next step, with awareness of his or her own state of mind. Hopefully, the person accepts the request. On rare occasions, more firmness is needed. It may help if the individual takes a break from Sangha practice to work on specific problem areas. Later, he or she could check back in with the facilitator or CTC to assess progress made.
7. Provide a list of community resources. Some Sangha facilitators have developed relationships with local therapists, twelve-step programs, or other support groups that can be offered as resources. (See the “Resources” section below for possible access to a consultation with a Dharma teacher or Order of Interbeing member who is a trained mental health professional.)

A Case Study

The integrity and harmony of the Sangha is important. When one or more Sangha members exhibit inappropriate behavior, what skillful means should be used to protect the Sangha's integrity? Should OI members or aspirants be treated differently than other Sangha members? What does compassionate action look like in these situations?

In the following situation, the key to protecting the Sangha was using the wisdom and leadership of local and regional Sangha caretaking groups to skillfully set clear boundaries for the individual committing harm.

A male OI member was accused of sexually harassing women in the Sangha. Initially, the regional Dharma teacher intervened and told this person he needed to take a break from attending Sangha, seek professional help, and work with the local Sangha's caretaking council to explore ways to resolve the situation. Several months later, the OI member had not looked for professional help and the situation remained unresolved. His continued interactions split the Sangha into factions of those supporting or not supporting him.

The local Sangha caretakers eventually concluded they could not address the situation successfully by themselves; the OI member in question was not responsive to them or to the Dharma teacher. At this point, the teacher brought the issue to the regional Sangha caretaking committee, which created a harmony committee comprised of three OI members with professional mental health skills. This harmony committee established guidelines for working with the individual, including mentoring from one committee member, and requiring the individual to begin therapy with a trained health professional and comply with the boundaries the committee set regarding limited Sangha participation.

The committee intended to protect the Sangha by preventing the person's participation until the situation could be resolved, while also offering him a path to begin transformation through working with health professionals.

Several elements contributed to the skillful handling of this situation. First, the Dharma teacher and the Sangha recognized the suffering of both the aggrieved women and the accused OI member. Second, the local Sangha tried to address the situation with care, and when Sangha leaders recognized their process was not sufficient, asked the regional Sangha for help. Third, a Sangha committee of experienced professionals established a process and guidelines for dealing with sexual harassment. All these elements greatly helped in making decisions that were helpful in protecting the Sangha.

Various practices for various mind states.

Skillful meditation is not a one-size-fits-all process. All experienced practitioners know that different mind states are helped by different meditative methods. Sanghas have found that providing a variety of practices helps all practitioners — including those with particular mental health difficulties — develop a menu of approaches. Sometimes, in our Sangha life, it may seem meditation is more talked about than done. Daily practice is usually essential. Without training the mind to choose how to direct attention and to what, progress will be limited.

In the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Buddha directs us to begin with the body. A huge proportion of suffering is mental—imaginings, memories, perceptions, afflictive emotions (a body sensation plus a story), and so on. When we can come back into awareness of the body, mental activity can subside and calmness can re-emerge.

Every practitioner should be encouraged to have a strong foundation in watering positive seeds and maintaining positive seeds in mind consciousness. Establishing these practices not only helps build a stronger foundation of well-being, making the negative seeds less likely to appear in mind consciousness, but when inevitable difficulties arise, these same practices can be available to help the negative seeds return to store consciousness in a slightly less powerful state. What follows are some practices to help build a repertoire for watering positive seeds and offer antidotes to negative seeds.

Awareness of the body. During sitting meditation, using the body as the object of meditation can help calm agitated mind states.

- Scan the body slowly, systematically from head to toe, or toe to head, noting positive, negative, or neutral feelings. (Useful for calming an agitated, racing mind.)
- Scan the body giving gratitude for the positive ways each body part contributes to happiness and/or well-being. Feel the gratitude fully for several breaths before going to another part of the body. (Useful with anger, depression)
- Maintain focus on a particular body part that feels pleasant. (Useful for shifting sadness, grief, agitation.)
- Send compassion to particular body parts that have taken a toll. (Useful for healing sadness, fear.)
- Scan the body quickly following the breath, breathing in starting at the feet up to the head, breathing out when going from head to toes. (Useful for grounding an agitated, busy mind)

Remembering pleasant experiences. The object of concentration in sitting meditation can be remembering a pleasant event: an object of beauty in nature, an experience of well-being,

safety, contentment, gratitude, confidence, kindness, open-heartedness, a benefactor. With great detail, bring awareness to the situation and notice how it affects the body. After a while, one can drop the story and maintain the focus on the pleasant body sensations themselves until they fade. It is beneficial to repeat the same object of concentration several times. (Useful as antidotes to negative mind states.)

Walking meditation can be cultivated as well using these same objects of concentration: feeling the support of the earth with each step, scanning the body for pleasant sensations or ease, sending the earth loving energy through the feet, walking extremely slowly to challenge balance, becoming aware of the mechanics of walking, and so on.

When these practices are well known, a practitioner finds it much easier to use them to restore a sense of well-being when out of sorts, using the positive habit energies. The practitioner can use these practices as needed even in the middle of other practices on an as needed basis. Practitioners who have distress working with difficult subjects or go into intrusive or unwholesome mind states should be encouraged to stick with watering positive seeds or seek one-on-one guidance to dip into more troubled waters. One needs to be aware of not only mind states but also body states to match a practice with a situation.

Breath awareness is not always helpful. There are times when just focusing on the breath is quite triggering. It can be helpful or very unhelpful to direct attention to the body or to the mind. Sangha facilitators are not playing the role of therapists, and do not necessarily know what all is going on with a person or have enough of the person's trust that they feel safe enough to share. So sometimes, conditions are insufficient to offer effective guidance or accompaniment. Other times, it can be helpful to do a practice with the person.

If a person is accustomed to going into acute unwholesome mental states, it might be helpful, when the person is in a period of calm, for a Sangha friend or facilitator to brainstorm with the person to find ways that helped restore a positive state in the past. The ways can be written on a card they keep with them, so that in a crisis they do not have to remember what helps.

To summarize, skillful means requires a repertoire of practices that can be used when various unwholesome mind states arise. The Buddha is sometimes referred to as a physician who listened to and observed each person deeply in order to properly assess the person's health and then offered the appropriate antidote or practice, to help heal and transform the suffering.

Resources

When a behavior disrupts Sangha harmony, and internal assistance and coaching have not resolved the situation, several resources are available. The first is to develop relationships with local mental health professionals and/or community mental health clinics that the Sangha facilitator can call on if need be. It can also be helpful to talk a situation through with a Dharma Teacher who is also a mental health professional. A few Dharma Teachers have volunteered to serve in this capacity from time to time. If you have exhausted the local resources, and feel it would be helpful to talk to a mental health trained Dharma Teacher, please use the link below to briefly describe the situation you are requesting a consultation about. A member of the Mental Health and Well-Being Practices committee will contact you to learn more about your situation and try to connect you with an appropriate person. Naturally we will keep your inquiry confidential.

Please open this link to share your situation and ask questions:

<http://goo.gl/forms/XVSu9KG7fd>

Other considerations and outstanding questions

Some other considerations and outstanding questions are not addressed in this booklet and could benefit from deeper reflection in the Mahasangha.

1. **Intersection of Sangha and the wider world.** The wider society manifests in our Sanghas. As the survey clearly illustrated, Sanghas are called upon to handle distress that people bring because of historical, societal, environmental causes and conditions, and the suffering engendered by the existence of isolation, competition, racism, sexism, classism, age discrimination, addiction, homelessness, natural disasters, death and dying, and on and on.

A Sangha is a continuously evolving community of practice within the society at large. We practice as a Sangha to become free. Through practice we become aware of our own habit energies, learn to transform them and through the mindfulness trainings look deeply into society's impact on us personally and collectively. Society and Sangha inter-are, they are not separate. Sangha life means connecting mindfully with society. As we encounter these Sangha challenges, we touch how society at large deals or does not deal, has insight or limited view on such issues, offers insight into not only our personal but also collective blind spots, habit patterns, obstacles, and fears. Touching this kind of awareness with deep looking and mindfulness may help us understand new ways to restore Sangha harmony.

One implication of the connection between Sangha and society is for Sanghas to continually explore what a Sangha is for, and what are the Sangha members' responsibilities towards each other. Reflecting on questions like how does the Sangha mirror aspects of the wider society (think of individualism, white privilege, private pursuit of happiness, and others) and how does the Sangha offer alternatives to the dominant culture (think of commitment to each other's awakening, responsibility for assisting others with their suffering, and others). The right mix of individual and collective responsibility and accountability is not clear. If, as Thay says, the next Buddha will emerge as a Sangha, we have much to learn about ever deeper Sangha building. What kinds of inquiry, experimentation and practices might help?

2. **Training for Sangha facilitators.** Most Sangha facilitators have had little to no instruction on how to develop, nurture, and facilitate a Sangha. Even the OI aspirancy training does not provide much guidance on this key aspect of being an OI member. Many Sanghas begin when a person returns from a large retreat and wants a local group to practice with. There are a few resources, like "Sangha in Box" and "The New Sangha Handbook" available through the Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation. *Friends on the Path* offers many ideas for Sangha-building, although it is over twenty years old and could benefit from updating. So what kind of support, training, mentoring, curriculum, retreats might be helpful in better preparing Sangha facilitators for the important and often complex role of Sangha building?
3. **Clear Sangha structure and membership process and criteria?** It seemed clear from the Dharma teachers survey that Sanghas with a solid process for becoming a Sangha "member" and a clear, strong Sangha structure and practice format had fewer incidents of behavior that disrupted Sangha harmony. Practices like new member orientation, reminders of the purpose of Sangha, expectations of members, the use of a care-taking council, a consistent schedule and format, the rotation of Sangha jobs, rooting the Sangha in Plum Village practices around inviting the bell, walking meditation, dharma sharing, chanting and singing — these kinds of practices built a container that could hold deep suffering, and handle troublesome behavior without the Sangha falling apart.

So a question arises: Would it be beneficial to be more explicit around elements that tend to create stability and longevity in a Sangha? Again, what is the middle way between prescribing and supporting, between a centralized model and local innovation?

4. **Opportunities for intensive practicing together.** In addition to the forms mentioned above, the common thread that links all these together to form a safe container of the Sangha is the presence of sincere, dedicated practitioners who are committed on the path together. Ideally, a Sangha would have periodic weekend retreats, preferably at one of the

monasteries, with contact with the monastics. Deeper practice needs longer periods of silence and contemplation. Since many geographically remote or rural Sanghas may not have easy or affordable access to a monastery, how might monastic or lay Dharma teachers organize themselves to offer weekend retreats for fledgling or geographically remote Sanghas, to support this deepening of the practice?

5. **Insurance.** Many Sanghas have been moved to learn about and buy liability insurance as well as becoming a non-profit organization to meet the requirements of the churches, schools, centers where they hold their Sangha gatherings. This encounter of Sangha life and societal or institutional requirements has offered a rich field of growth and practice for those Sanghas encountering them. Becoming aware of how and if your insurance may cover mental health behavioral challenges may expand your Sangha's insight into the legal and insurance issues surrounding such challenges. Further experience and information sharing can help support our collective efforts.

In gratitude

We offer this booklet with a deep bow of gratitude to the hundreds of Sangha facilitators who dedicate so much time and energy to creating peaceful, loving, transformative Sanghas, and who struggle at times with some of the kinds of issues touched on. We hope you feel supported and encouraged by this booklet. We are also grateful to the Dharma Teachers who took the time to respond to the survey that informed this booklet. This is a living document. We hope you feel welcomed to share your experiences and learnings for future and better editions. Please send an email to wellbeing@orderofinterbeing.org to share your ideas and experiences. May all beings be happy and free.

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